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EPA proposes JPL for Superfund cleanup list

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LA CANADA FLINTRIDGE — The Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the site of chemical dumping from the 1940s to 1962, was proposed Friday for inclusion on the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund National Priority List for cleanup, one of six western sites suggested for the list.

According to the EPA, a priority listing identifies sites potentially posing the greatest long-term threat to public health and the environment. The agency ranks priority locations according to hazardous threats to nearby populations through actual or potential contamination of soil, groundwater, surface water or air.

Cancer-causing chemicals had been identified in the Arroyo Seco more than 10 years ago. A 1988 study for the EPA identified six pits where chemical waste from JPL, including solvents, Freon, mercury, rocket fuel and sulfuric acid, were dumped during the 1940s and 1950s.

Two years ago, JPL began conducting groundwater tests to measure the contamination. Now, with the EPA priority listing, the lab can move ahead with a clean-up plan.

"This marks the EPA's direct oversight and involvement with the cleanup," said JPL spokesman Franklin O'Donnell. "Passing this hurdle was one of the things that needed to happen so we can continue to identify the source of contaminants and put together a cleanup plan."

O'Donnell said it was critical for the lab not to proceed too far ahead of any EPA involvement because the federal agency could later come back to JPL and deem cleanup procedures inadequate.

EPA spokeswoman Paula Bruin said the federal agency will conduct a 60-day public comment period. If no new information is received, it will be approximately six- to eight months before JPL is placed on the final priority list.

JPL is not eligible for Superfund money because it sits on federal property, and NASA eventually will foot the cleanup bill, O'Donnell said.

In 1990, contractors for JPL installed five monitoring wells on lab property and found significantly elevated levels of four volatile organic compounds: carbon tetrachloride (CTC), trichloroethylene (TCE), perchloroethylene (PCE) and 1,1-dichloroethene. Each chemical exceeded California drinking water standards in at least one of the testing wells.

According to the EPA, an estimated 68,000 people obtain drinking water from municipal wells within four miles of the site. Four City of Pasadena wells were shut down from 1989 to 1990 because of contamination. Although JPL did not acknowledge direct contamination, it paid \$1.125 million in 1990 to help build a water cleanup plant on the east bank of the Arroyo near the lab.

With the new water plant, the wells were returned to operation in September 1990. However, two Lincoln Avenue Water Co. wells shut down in 1987 because of contamination remain closed.

Bill Bangham, Pasadena manager of water systems, said the Superfund listing is "good news" because JPL now can officially start a cleanup plan.

Bangham said water from the reopened city wells still is sampled monthly before being treated at the cleanup plant, and after treatment the water is tested weekly. City water requirements are more strict than state levels, he said.